

## Southeast High School Library Murals



Photograph of one of the six mural panels in the Southeast library.

Back in the days of the W.P.A., an interesting project was undertaken for the benefit of the Southeast Branch of the Kansas City Public Library. William Wight, architect, conceived the plan of having murals painted on the walls, depicting scenes from Mark Twain's books. Local artists were invited to submit sketches, and those finally chosen were made by Wilbur Phillips who was already known in Kansas City and the middle west for his paintings. Mr. Phillips directed the W.P.A. art project in which the Southeast murals were produced.

The scenes were painted on canvas, which can be removed from the walls of the library if necessary, and the colors, which are now eleven years old, are still admired for their freshness and for their muted tones. Intentionally, the colors chosen were quiet ones, since the pictures were intended for a room meant for study. There are six panels, portraying Mark Twain as a youth, life on the Mississippi, and scenes from "Joan of Arc," "The Connecticut Yankee," "Tom Sawyer," and Huckleberry Finn."

More than six months were taken for the completion of the project, and another several months, after installation, for the completion of the borders. After the canvas paintings were applied to the walls, the canvas was shellacked, then a coat of liquid starch was applied, on the theory that the starch would collect the dirt which could be washed off, and a new coat of starch applied to the shellacked finish which, in its turn, protects the colors.

Mr. Phillips was aided by Miss Burrell Haley and Mr. Oren Pringle in painting the canvas. Mrs. Beatrice Lawhon proved to be of assistance to the W.P.A. artists in drawing up the color scheme. The canvas was painted in the old Irving Pitt building at Ninth and Locust streets, across from the Main Library. The murals were installed in the Southeast branch shortly before it was opened in June, 1938.

Students at Southeast high school like the murals, and the scenes from “Joan of Arc” and “Connecticut Yankee” suggested the name, “Southeast Knights,” as well as names for some of their clubs.

An attractive feature of the six panels is that the Mississippi river winds through all of them. Missouri plants and wild flowers are shown in the foregrounds of all the scenes.

This discussion of the murals in the Southeast Library is from “Art Works Owned by the Public Library” (circa 1950), Kansas City Public Library Records (SC6, Box 17, Folder 4), Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City Missouri.